

The Time the
Sky Fell on Us

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The Time the Sky Fell on Us

*A Reader's Digest \$2500 "First Person"
Award (See page 210)*

By Edith Squier

YESTERDAY among some keepsakes in the basement I found the photographs we took years ago, in Chicago's Union Station. There was an automatic booth where, for a dime, you could strike a pose and, while you waited, your picture, framed in dull metal, would drop out of a slot.

I sat and looked at the photographs a long time. It was like seeing the faces of two strangers—a man in his early 30's, a woman in her middle 20's. But the clothing was familiar: the off-the-face hat and black dress, the blue pin-stripe suit from an end-of-the-season sale.

There are several pictures of each of us, for we had kept on dropping dimes to give our hands something to do, and our voices something to talk about, while our minds became adjusted to a new and terrifying world. Although our lips in every

picture are smiling, somehow the eyes don't match the lips.

WE HAD boarded the train at Bloomington before daylight that morning. As the wheels click-clacked through the flat Illinois farm land they had a cheerful and a reassuring sound. The train pulled into Union Station and he took a pair of dark glasses from his pocket and clipped them to the gold rims he wore. We walked rapidly to a cab.

A bitter wind swept off Lake Michigan and howled around the building where the famous doctor had his office. As we went up in the crowded elevator I had no doubt that the doctor could fix everything. He would know a new treatment, a drug, perhaps even surgery.

It had begun suddenly about five years before, with headaches and rapid and frightening changes in

gins, and reflected on the strange contrast here in the gulf where it ended. The beginning was a world where man had provided himself with every comfort and luxury. The end was a world of the primitive and wild, a world of rugged men, of

explorers and pioneers who wage a constant fight merely to stay alive.

My friend from Ottawa had understated the truth. The St. Lawrence is more than a whole world. It is a series of worlds—a little universe.



A Layman Looks at His Parish

By Clifford P. Morehouse

HOW DOES my parish look to me, a churchman?

It is a poor, worldly thing, often concerned with petty matters; yet it is the doorway to the Great Church.

It is often hopelessly behind the times; yet it is the gateway to the future.

It is often torn by controversy; yet it holds the key to eternal harmony.

Its minister is only human, and often makes mistakes; yet he is the type and substance of the Great High Priest.

Its altar is humble and plain; yet from it is dispensed the Bread of Life.

Its choir sings but indifferently; yet through it sing the choirs of angels and archangels.

Its organizations are petty, and often seem to have little to do with religion; yet through them the organism that is Christ's Holy Body may function.

Its preaching is often pedestrian, even dull; yet through its pulpit the Word of God speaks to His children.

Its church school is noisy, and the teachers are not well trained; yet through them a new generation is learning to carry on the Faith.

It seems to have little influence on the community; yet without it the community would be a poor place to live in.

Its budget is small, and hard to balance; yet within it is to be found the Great Treasure.

Its missionary flame burns low; yet through it men are sent forth to preach the Gospel to all nations.

It is full of sinners like me; yet it is the mother of saints.

In the eyes of the world it is a poor and perhaps a pitiful thing, one that can be easily overlooked or ignored.

But in the eyes of God it is His Holy Church, the manifestation of His Presence in that particular corner of His world.

My parish may seem weak, inefficient, inadequate and worldly; yet it is my link with the Great Reality; it is the very means whereby God comes down to earth and dwells among His people.

vision until there was a pile of discarded lenses in his drawer. After a while the headaches had come less frequently, but his sight had continued to fail, slowly, relentlessly. His work as a junior accountant had become more and more difficult, a physical and mental strain that sent him home at night exhausted.

The long months had been a succession of examinations, eye drops, massive doses of vitamins. Now our own ophthalmologist had urged a consultation with this specialist in Chicago, "to be sure."

Although there had been nights when I sat up in bed with the full weight of possibility suffocating me with panic, I was confident now, with the invincible optimism of the young. This man would know what to do. Our kind and sympathetic doctor's "to be sure" meant only to be sure what treatment to use.

As we waited his turn we planned what we would do afterward. A day in Chicago was always a treat. We decided to make a full day of it, staying over until the last train.

A nurse called him then and I leafed through magazines and watched the scurrying crowds below until nearly one o'clock, when he came out. They wanted to make some more tests after lunch, he said. They hadn't told him a thing. No, he couldn't tell what the doctor thought. "But he can't understand how I do my work."

We had lunch in a coffee shop, located a theater which was showing a new Gary Cooper movie we

wanted to see, and a restaurant with a rose-shaded lamp on each table, where we would have dinner. Then we went back to the waiting room and he went into the doctor's office. He was in there a long time.

Finally he came out; his expression told me nothing. I couldn't ask in the crowded waiting room nor in the elevator, but outside in the street I stopped and pulled him over against the building. My heart was beating so rapidly I could hardly speak, but I tried to keep my voice as calm as if I were asking what he would like for dinner.

"What did he say?"

"There's—it's not very common. They don't know much about it."

"What's he going to do?"

"There's nothing he can do. Nothing anybody can do."

The suffocating weight was there again, and the panic.

It was cruel to question him further but I had to know, now. For the young can't wait. Whatever the verdict in crisis, they feel they must have it at once. The middle-aged, having learned that true-life stories don't always have happy endings, are willing to postpone hearing the truth. They want to hold on to hope a little longer. And the old, whose ears have heard many heartbreaking pronouncements, would as soon not be told at all.

"Will it get worse?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Will you be—?"

"In time. He can't say how long."

That was all. He put his hand un-

der my arm and without a word more we began to walk rapidly—toward Union Station. On that long silent walk I thought of many things. Golf. He had stopped smoking to buy his clubs and mine. Fishing, hunting, bridge.

Most serious, of course, was his work, for which he had a singular aptitude. We had planned that when we could afford it he would take a night-school course to become a certified public accountant. I could go back to teaching—but a man shouldn't have to sit out his life alone, in the dark. Not a man of intelligence and pride.

And there were torturing whys. Why blindness? Why for *him*?

There would be a train in an hour. We walked about the station, stopped to study posters, travel folders and magazine displays, bulletin boards. We went into the coffee shop, drank a few swallows of coffee, tasted the rolls, and then we began another tour of the station—walking—walking. In a far corner we found the photographic booth—a desert oasis for two thirsty nomads. I read the instructions aloud and we began taking turns, one picture after another. Twice I went for more dimes, and then, finally, our train was called.

I watched the lights until we were out of the suburbs. Now the wheels clicked with a difference: they had a malevolent sound for they were ticking off precious seconds of sight. My hand lay on the green plush between us. His closed over it and we

sat that way, without speaking, a the way to Bloomington.

THAT WAS more than 20 years ago. When I came up from the basement yesterday with the photographs, looked out from the bedroom window. I saw him come out of the cage house, where he had been feeding the 1700 laying hens in their long rows of individual wire cages. Since their feed and egg troughs are in front of them, their automatic water troughs behind them, a man of patience and perseverance can care for them with a minimum of sight.

As I watched he adjusted the variable-density goggles he wears out the doors, found the center of the gravel path and started to the house. The late February sun was bright and he was having more trouble than usual in finding his way. But he made it.

After lunch I brought out the photographs and his powerful magnifying glass. "Do you remember these pictures?" I asked.

He examined them carefully. "That was the time the sky fell on us," he said. "I thought it was the end of everything."

And then, handing me the photographs and the glass, "If you could help me worm the new pullets this afternoon, maybe we could go fishing tomorrow. It's early but the radio says a man from Cincinnati caught a 12-pound walleye down on the Yamacraw yesterday—on a yellow doll fly. We must get a couple of doll flies...."

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